



# Primal Scream

*by Frank Werner*

I might have had a choice, but I waited too long.

There was a time when I could have stepped out. I mean, gotten out of this rotten world that now has be trapped. But that was long ago. And of course, I was younger then. I didn't know what life had in store for me.

Then I had the energy but not the brains, not the experience.

So, I spend my days as I am now. Waiting. Sitting on this park bench with a lot of other losers, waiting for something, anything to change, when I know it isn't going to. So I pass the time, maybe do a little panhandling, get by until the next freebie from the holy brothers.

God! Oh Christ, when I think about it, my brain begins to rage. My chest feels like I'm going to explode. My skin crawls as if it wanted to leave me. But I stay quiet. I mean, I sit and wait it out no matter how long it takes, and soon it begins to pass.

There's Louie sitting across from me. His long brown hair hangs shaggy and loose around his head. He's like me. He thinks about it too much. And sometimes for Louie, it just takes control and he can't do anything to stop it.

He just got out of the hole two days ago. Thirty days for disorderly conduct. He punched a rent-a-cop in the mouth. It all started because he wanted to see his boy. He could've got charged with assault, but his old lady pleaded with the rent-a-cop not to press charges. I don't know how she did it, but Louie only got thirty.

Only got thirty, what a joke. Thirty, sixty, a thousand days, they don't matter to Louie anymore. Not since she moved out on him. I guess she left because he took to the hard stuff. Man, what else did he have left! No job, no car, nothing was left for him except his boy. Now he's gone.

They hadn't been getting along for some time. But, even when he got drunk, it wasn't a mean kind of drunk. He just sat sort of silent and glassy-eyed. I guess she couldn't take it anymore, him not talking, just sitting and waiting. She never understood what he was waiting for, or why.

None of them understand what it's like to lose your job and be told never, I mean never, expect it back again.

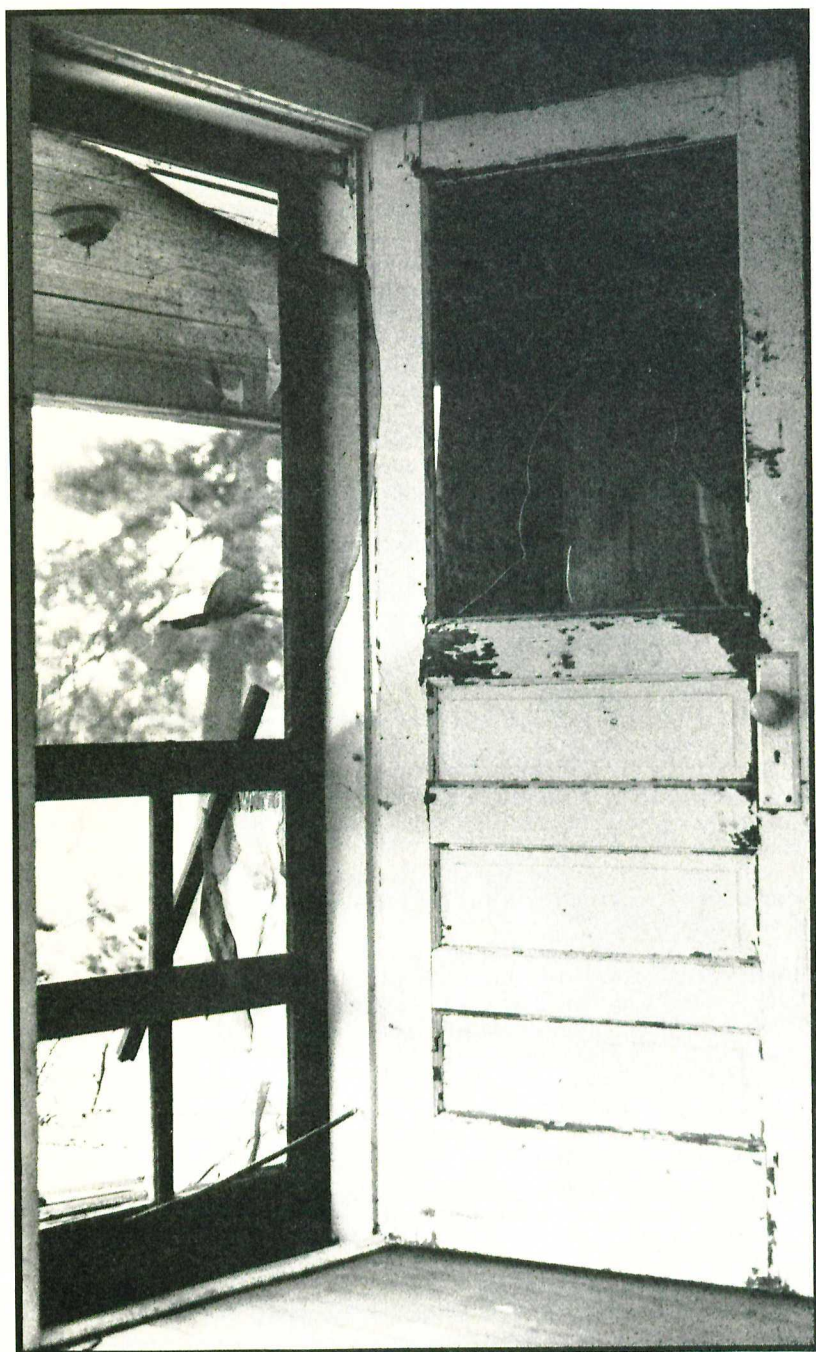
Louie and I spent half our lives living or working in the mills. Those mills—big, ugly, stinking, beautiful.

Once, years ago, Gary, Indiana, rivalled the world, even Pittsburgh, when it came to making steel. Least that's what all of us kids growing up in the shadow of those rusty brown smelters thought.

We knew there were lost of places in the world that made steel, but no place that made really good steel, the steel that came out of Gary.

My father was a steelworker. He lost his right hand in the mill. He thought he was ruined for life. But he came back, and went to work for the Union. He kept his pride and survived. Maybe things were different then. Maybe it was easier when you were a man with choices to make. Now, you lose your job and nobody cares; you're just another number. It coesn't matter to them that you don't have a paycheck, a home, wheels, pride. They still have their jobs.

When Louie and I had our work, there was nothing that would stop us from being on top of the world. Louie and I understood one another. Back in





school, we were a team that couldn't be split up. It was like we were blood. I guess we were pretty wild, between the two of us. I felt the rage then, but it was just kid's stuff, you know.

I can't get through to Louie anymore. I say something, but he just sits starin' at the world. He ain't mean, he just isn't.

Wild, yeah, Gary's a wild town. According to all of those psychologists and sociologists back in school, it's filled with violence, with just out and out meanness. Meanness, man, what do they know about meanness! At the end of the day, they'd drive out to live in the country while we stayed here. If they had to spend just one day, just twenty-four hours here, you'd find them bored stiff in the morning. The meanness would kill 'em.

Like my mother. That's what killed her, I know it is. All the meanness that surrounded her. They say it was cancer, but I know.

She told me to get out. She said, "Get away from this place, it'll only make you small like your father." I couldn't understand what she had against him. I thought it was the sickness talking.

I didn't leave. I was home here and didn't want to make my home anyplace else. I found a woman here. Had my eye on her for a long time. Took her out. And then, well, circumstances just took care of matters and we got married. I still think it was the right thing to do no matter how it ended up. The holy brothers disagree, but then they never did like how things turned out.

Man, that was one strange woman. Still is. I don't understand Joyce at all, but I guess she thinks she's doin' the right thing. Oh, we had a few really good years. For a while, we were a natural. But things natural always seem to end.

When we went dancin', everyone just stepped aside to watch us strut our stuff. There just wasn't a time when I didn't bring her some little something home. When I had a job.

And in bed, yeah, that was good too. I don't understand her. I tried to give her everything I could, it just wasn't enough anymore.

She was hungry for something. Things went all right for years, then the arguments started. I admit, it wasn't all her fault, but she just wouldn't ever see things my way. A man's got to have some pride. She could've tried to understand.

And then I lost my job. She took to working at some crummy fast food restaurant. I could've done that but I was a steelworker, not some greasy short-order cook.

It was those odd hours she worked that kept us apart more and more. Then I started to think that maybe she had something going on with this joker who worked with her. He was the assistant manager or something and going to college. She was always talkin' about Howie sayin' this about the economy or that about the Union. Man, those kind of guys have always got me by the balls. They're so sure they've got everything pegged. Well, they're the ones who got us in this mess. If they're so damned smart, why don't they get us out?

He talked her into taking a class at the extension. Just what we needed. Now, it was me out of work and her never home.

Don't get me wrong. I was never one to stop her from improving herself. Didn't I let her take that flower arranging class several years ago? And after the baby was born, and she wanted to lose that weight, I even suggested she go workout at an exercise place.

But this guy had put all sorts of ideas in her head. That's what made me think maybe she and him had a thing between them. She just wouldn't listen anymore.

I even put it up to her about the two of them. It was a Tuesday, no, it was

Wednesday, and she had been at work and that class. She was late. She said why, but I can't remember now. At the time, all I knew was that the baby had been crying all day, and me cooped up in the house. It's only natural for a man to want some freedom, isn't it?

As she came in the door I thought I had it all ready. I was going to handle it so cool. But right away she starts gettin' defensive. Said she was tired and didn't want to start all the fighting again.

I told her if she was so tired all the time, maybe she should find a job closer to home.

"And how many places around her do you know that are hiring?" she pops back.

"Well, maybe if you'd drop that class or at least come straight home."

"And so," she asks me real snottily, "Just what's that supposed to mean?"

I really don't recall just what was said next or what order it was said in. All I can remember is her standing there shouting at me all superior-like.

That's when I slapped her.

It wasn't hard or anything. I don't even know what made me do it. I just couldn't take it anymore.

She got real quiet. Standing there looking at me like she would cry, but she didn't. Then, in a voice kind of soft and scary, like my mother before she died, she told me she wasn't quitting the class. I could stay here and rot with the rest of the garbage, but she was getting out.

She turned and walked into the bedroom. I heard the door click locked as she closed it.

I wanted to busy through it, to smash it into a thousand splinters. To prove to her that I was the man. But I didn't. I was afraid. I had never heard the rage inside my head so loud as I heard it then.

I got a beer from the kitchen, then sat on the sofa staring at the bedroom door. Hours may have gone by, or maybe only minutes. I couldn't hear anything but the rage in my head or feel anything but the ache in my chest and the cold beer on the back of my throat.

We'd had good times before, why couldn't we again?

I heard the door unlock, but I couldn't hear her moving at all. I waited but she didn't come out.

Standing up, I felt the rage ooze out of me. I was tired, but jittery. As I turned the handle to the bedroom door it opened easily. With the light falling into the room from behind me, I could make out her body lying on the bed, facing the wall. Her long dark hair made curved and jagged dark designs on the white pillowcase. Slipping out of my clothes, I set them on the chair beside the bed. She was quiet. The sheet was cool against my skin as I pulled it over my body. She lay still. But, I could tell she was awake from her short breaths and the quick rise and fall of her side. I put my arm around her waist, feeling the warmth of her body through the thin nightgown. I wanted to make it up to her and maybe she knew that, since she put her hand on mine.

Moving my hand, I drew the nightgown up and touched the soft skin of her belly. I wanted to let her know that I loved her, that I knew I had treated her badly. I couldn't say it. I rolled her towards me and she didn't resist. I needed to show her how much I cared, how much she meant to me. She lay still and quiet.

Later, right before I went to sleep, I thought that it all might just work out. If the morning would come, I would somehow make it all work out right. But how?

I slept deep and long. Somewhere in my sleep, I realized that the usual morning noises were missing. I hadn't noticed when Joyce had gotten up for



work; the hollow where she had slept was cold. I didn't hear the baby making its morning sounds. As I slipped on a pair of shorts, I knew that what I had felt and hoped for last night was gone. When I discovered the baby's bed empty, I wanted to cry, but I didn't.

It took me another fifteen minutes of stumbling around the apartment before I discovered the note on the kitchen table.

She was kind, like the night before. She said all sorts of things that people in that situation say. Things of guilt, things of sorrow. It was short, it was simple, but it wasn't cruel. I think she knew I couldn't take any cruelty. She ended up saying how we all change . . . had to change. If we didn't, we'd end up like those giant animals from long ago. Dead.

I showed the note to Louie when I saw him later. It had happened to him. I thought he could tell me what to do. He read it and a strange smile came across his lips.

"Dinosaur," was all he said.

I started to ask him . . . but he just shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, then turned and walked away.

That was six months ago. We're still waiting, Louie and I, waiting in the park with the others. The weather is starting to get warm again and it isn't so bad, now.

On clear days you can look between the bank building with its blue glass windows and the old limestone insurance building, and see the tops of the old smelter towers like some fiery red-brown mountains rising up beside the lake.

At times, I think I can see a trace of smoke coming from them, but they're not operating. And whenever I feel the ache in my chest or hear the rage in my head, I look at them and try to remember when they spewed out smoke and we all complained.

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## Autumn Moss

*by Nancy Zueget*

Chapped knees and wind-blown cheeks  
Have comfort in knowing such cracked, cold cement,  
owning tresses of dying moss, they are  
quite the same in days of fall  
when the winds take pity on nothing.  
The moss has been loosened, its roots ripped by  
gusts of unkindly breezes.  
Locks of turf thrown back behind its face  
of the wind-burned curb.